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ABSTRACT

This report summarizes Scottish research during 1995 which aimed to assess the take-up, knowledge, understanding, and use of the National Record of Achievement (NRA) in all sectors. The survey found a lack of awareness of the NRA among employers and colleges. One recommendation from the report is for future development and promotion of the NRA in Scotland. (EH)

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ED 424 128

INTERCHANGE

No 44

Evaluation of the National Record of Achievement in Scotland

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Evaluation of the National Record of Achievement in Scotland

Bridget Somekh, Teresa Tinklin, Lynne Edwards and Ron Mackay

Scottish Council for Research in Education

The Scottish Council for Research in Education (SCRE) was commissioned by The Scottish Office Education and Industry Departments (which have since been amalgamated) to evaluate the National Record of Achievement (NRA) in Scotland. The evaluation was carried out throughout 1995 and aimed to assess the take-up, understanding and use of the NRA in all sectors; to identify problem areas and examples of good practice and to make recommendations for the future development and promotion of the NRA in Scotland. In addition, it aimed to inform policy-makers and provide a basis for discussion for all those involved in developing the NRA.

Introduction

The National Record of Achievement (NRA) is a UK-wide initiative introduced jointly by the Employment Department, the Department for Education and Science, the Scottish Office and the Welsh Office, in February 1991. It is intended to summarise an individual's overall achievements in and outside of education, in training and throughout life. The NRA document provides a standard presentational style. It comprises a folder with pockets for nine pages, which may be included in any order, summarising an individual's achievements and experiences, attendance rate, employment history, individual action plan, personal details, personal statement, qualifications and credits, school achievements (now called achievements in education). The ninth page is left blank for any other relevant information.

This evaluation investigated the use of the NRA in Scotland. (The recently published report by Sir Ron Dearing on education and training for 16-19 year olds considered the role of the NRA in England and Wales.) Information for the evaluation was gathered from all relevant sectors, including education, employment and training, in the following ways:

- an initial phase of unstructured information-gathering from key individuals who had been closely involved with the development of the NRA in Scotland;
- structured surveys, using postal questionnaires, of all local authority, independent and special schools with secondary age pupils, all institutions of further and higher education, all directors of education;
- structured surveys, using postal or telephone questionnaires, of smaller samples of employers, training providers and recent school leavers;
- informal telephone interviews with a small number of careers officers;
- visits to four schools, recommended as sites of good practice, which involved interviews with staff and pupils and the collection of relevant documentation.

The opportunity to visit four schools enabled us to talk directly to teachers and pupils about their experiences of the NRA. We were able to discuss successes and problems in depth and this provided a useful cross-check to the survey data.

Use of the NRA by schools

Overall 75% of the schools that responded to the questionnaire were using the NRA or an equivalent (ie a record with the same contents as the NRA but a different – usually a regional – format). This figure is based on a response rate to the questionnaire of 55%. There were marked differences in the uptake of the NRA amongst different types of school: 82% of local authority secondary schools, 45% of special schools and 39% of independent secondary schools were using it.

A process and a product

A distinction was made between the NRA document and the NRA process in schools. The process usually involved young people in a cycle of activities: reviewing and recording their achievements, assessing their own strengths and weaknesses and setting themselves targets. The pages of the NRA were sometimes used as vehicles for this process and updated at intervals, or the school may have produced separate worksheets that guided pupils through the process. Not all schools were doing action planning with their pupils at the time of the research, although the majority of local authority secondary schools that were using the NRA were doing it with their pupils at least in S4.

It was clear that commitment to the NRA process was high in schools, particularly amongst guidance staff. It was seen as positive to encourage pupils to focus on their achievements in and outside of school and not just on their academic qualifications. The action planning process was seen as beneficial and staff expressed the view that the NRA helped pupils to develop self-esteem.

> I feel that the whole ethos of it is very positive and it's something we need to be encouraging the kids to do more of.
>
> *(Learning support teacher)*

Some schools have made progress towards integrating the NRA into the curriculum and into the whole school's approach to assessment and recording. It remains, however, largely a guidance led initiative.

How can more progress be made towards integrating the NRA across the curriculum?

Most schools indicated that the NRA process had increased pupil self-motivation, enhanced guidance and made pupils more pro-active in their own learning. While the majority of schools indicated that they thought both the NRA process and document were valuable to pupils of all abilities, the majority agreed that the process rather than the product was the most important aspect of the NRA.

Guidance staff led NRA activities in almost all schools with subject teachers working with them to varying degrees. Subject teachers' lack of involvement was, in fact, cited as a problem by some schools. The NRA process may be occurring in isolation, often in Personal and Social Education time, or throughout the curriculum. About one third of schools indicated that NRA processes had been fully integrated into the curriculum. The year in which students began

NRA-related activities also varied. In the majority of schools, pupils were beginning to record achievement in a formal way in S3 or S4, but in many schools pupils were also doing activities which were relevant to the NRA in S1 and S2.

Schools said that the contents of the NRA product or summative document were mostly being produced by the young people themselves. In most secondary and independent schools, pupils received help from their teachers to produce the personal statement, achievements and experiences page, school achievements page and individual action plan. In the majority of special schools, pupils worked one-to-one with a member of staff. Some schools had allocated staffing allowances to provide secretarial support so that the final NRA document could be professionally word-processed, some schools were introducing software that students could use to produce their own NRAs and others were requiring their students to hand-write the final document.

Support for the NRA

Regional policies on the NRA varied considerably. Some local authorities were requiring the schools in their regions either to include the NRA explicitly in their school development plans or to have an explicit NRA policy, while others were encouraging their schools to use it rather than requiring them to. Some authorities had organised pilots of the NRA and were co-ordinating the gradual phasing-in of the NRA to all schools in the region. Others were offering encouragement and support but leaving the logistics of its actual introduction to individual schools.

Each year schools receive free copies of the NRA folder and pages for all pupils in S4 from the Scottish Office. Support for the NRA had been provided for the majority of secondary and special schools through TVEI and to varying degrees by local authorities. A small number of authorities were providing no specific support but most were providing some kind of support such as in-service or technical support. Very few schools said that the NRA would actually stop as a result of the end of TVEI. However many said that the end of TVEI would mean the loss of or reduction in some kind of support for the NRA.

While the degree of commitment to the NRA in schools was high, staff were clear that the NRA requires a lot of time to implement. This was cited by both schools and local authorities as an obstacle to a full implementation of the NRA and to its effectiveness. It was also cited as an obstacle to the introduction and development of the NRA in other sectors.

> *Any project that's looking at the delivery of NRA has to start looking at how much is it actually going to cost because this is an extra on an already heavily burdened ... group of willing workers and you cannot ask staff to implement initiatives and not get time to do it. That's the bottom line and it's heavy. And there are a few ... who do it because the interest is there and it's more an academic interest in the long term objectives ... but it's the same problem - we've got no time.*
>
> *(PT guidance)*

Continued implementation of the NRA will require an on-going investment of resources.

What implications does the ending of TVEI funding have for schools in this respect?

Young people's views of the NRA

Young people have difficulty writing positively about themselves and their achievements.

How can a culture change be brought about that would make it more acceptable and usual for young people to view themselves and their achievements in a positive light?

The majority of S5 pupils surveyed said that the NRA process had raised their awareness of skills they were using in their subjects and helped them to know themselves better. They felt that writing about their personal qualities had given them a boost in self-confidence. The majority of FE and HE students surveyed said they had found the NRA process that they had experienced at school helpful in planning for the future, raising their self-awareness and addressing their weaknesses. School pupils and those who had left school seemed to value the NRA document and find it impressive.

Young people said they had found writing positively about themselves difficult and embarrassing: it was difficult to know about themselves and it was seen as boasting to make positive statements about oneself. School staff also expressed concern about this.

> *It's sometimes amazing just how long it takes to encourage people to say something good about themselves.*
>
> *(APT guidance)*

> *The children in this area tend to have a very negative opinion of themselves. They tend not to think that they've achieved very much, particularly the ones ... that are not going on to further or higher education ... a lot of our work was in encouraging them to see the achievements that they did have.*
>
> *(Learning support teacher)*

Use of the NRA post-school in selection

There is a lack of clarity and considerable differences of opinion amongst different stakeholders about the purpose and value of the NRA post-school

Is it feasible and/or appropriate for the NRA to continue to be promoted as a record of life-long achievement to be used across all kinds of organisations as both a tool for selection and a means of self-assessment and personal learning?

The NRA was being used in selection by the majority of further education (FE) institutions, but by only very few higher education (HE) institutions. Out of 95 employers and training providers approached, only 45 agreed to be interviewed. The others said they had never used the NRA, had never heard of it or felt it was not appropriate to their needs. Of the 45 interviewed, just over half (26) said they were using the NRA in selection.

The initiative for using the NRA in selection was coming mostly from young people. The majority of institutions were using it only when it was presented at interview or sent with an application form unsolicited by a young person. Most interviewers and interviewees who had used it in selection, however, said they had found it useful and that it presented a fair or good overall picture of a young person.

Use of the NRA post-school in the development of young people

Only a small number of employers, training providers and FE colleges were using the NRA to support and record the continuing education and development of young people. No HE institutions were using it in this way. Those FE and HE institutions not using the NRA said that they preferred to use another method,

that few students had NRAs, that it was not institutional policy or that it was too time-consuming. Activities that were clearly in line with the aims of the NRA were, however, occurring in some of the organisations not using the NRA. Training plans, action plans and alternative records of achievement were being used by these organisations.

One possible response to the perceived failure of the NRA to be adopted whole-heartedly by employers and FE/HE is to promote it more effectively.

How could the NRA be promoted most effectively to these groups? What would the aims of this promotion be?

Most schools were encouraging their students to use their NRAs in the transition from school to work, training or further study and to continue to update their NRAs after leaving school. Young people had clearly picked up this message and seemed keen to continue using their NRAs after leaving school. About two thirds of the school leavers said it was likely that they would use their NRAs when applying for jobs, training places or further study in the future. The large majority also said they thought they would update their NRAs in the future. However, it will be difficult for young people to sustain this initial enthusiasm if employers and colleges are not interested and if no support or facilities are being provided to help young people to update their NRAs.

Young people were clearly receiving mixed messages about the value of the NRA post-school. A number of school staff expressed concern about this.

> *We can do our bit in the school, but unless you push it through right into industry and employers ... eventually it'll knock back on us because people will say 'well, I took it along to X (a company) and they didn't know what I was talking about' - word gets round the community really quickly.*
>
> *(Assistant rector)*

There was some indication that this may begin to affect schools' commitment to the NRA product and that this could in turn have a negative effect on commitment to the NRA process. Concern about the lack of awareness of the NRA amongst employers and other user groups was echoed by local authority staff and careers service personnel. Both groups said that there was a need for national marketing of the NRA to raise its profile amongst employers and other users.

Currently few mechanisms seem to be in place for effective liaison between the different sectors using the NRA. It is already being integrated informally by some schools, employers and other interested parties with existing services and initiatives.

Is it feasible to integrate the NRA formally with existing services and initiatives?

Liaison between sectors

Currently few mechanisms seem to be in place for effective liaison between the different sectors using the NRA. Very few schools (apart from special schools) or FE institutions had liaised with other users of the NRA in order to promote it to them or to ask for feedback on it. The problem seems to be mainly one of the absence of mechanisms for liaison. Employers, FE, HE, training providers and school staff are all working under pressure and by definition have little to do with those groups on the other side of 'transition points'. It might be relatively easy to set up links between the NRA process in schools and some other existing initiatives such as Education-Business Partnerships and Investors in People. The latter would be particularly valuable as it is already well-established in the business world and, like the NRA, is concerned with the development of individuals.

It would be advantageous to pupils to integrate the careers service action plan with pupils' work on the NRA.

What scope is there for integrating the two processes? What would be the advantages and disadvantages of integration?

The only group which has established liaison mechanisms with schools, FE, HE and employers is careers officers. The careers service staff interviewed said they had marketed the NRA informally to businesses but that they received no funding to do so officially. Sixty percent of schools said they had liaised with their careers service over the NRA. This is to be expected since careers services are specifically set up to assist individuals at transition points in their lives. However, even here there is a lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities in relation to the NRA. Careers officers draw up an action plan for pupils, but they may have little or no involvement with the action planning process in the NRA. Bringing these two processes together is of obvious advantage for pupils, but it requires a high level of co-ordination between schools and the careers service which might have resource implications.

Good practice and the NRA

Good practice in the NRA requires commitment from all concerned to the ideal that individuals should be supported in taking increasing responsibility for their own learning and developing pride in their own achievements. We saw examples of good practice, but each included elements unique to that particular school. The common feature was that staff had a very good understanding of the purpose of the NRA and had found ways of integrating its practice with other on-going work. In the full report, we present a set of questions designed as a focus for staff development to promote discussion aimed at the development of understanding of the NRA.

Recommendations

In the full report we present recommendations and suggestions arising from the evaluation. They are intended to form a useful discussion document for national policy-makers and those leading the development of the NRA in schools, FE and HE institutions and the new local authorities. They are summarised below.

- Clarify government policy for the NRA in order to give it a high profile nationally.
- Clarify the purpose of the NRA. In particular, establish whether it should continue to be promoted as a record of lifelong learning in schools, FE, HE and employment. If so, it should be promoted more effectively.
- Give overall responsibility for promoting the NRA to one body.
- Integrate the NRA with other initiatives such as Skillseekers, Education-Business Partnerships and Investors in People.
- Clarify the responsibilities of all the varying partners involved in developing and using the NRA.
- Enable individual organisations to customise the NRA process to suit the needs of individuals at that time, in that context, while keeping consistency of the NRA product.

- Clarify the role of the careers service in supporting the NRA process and promoting the product.
- Encourage young people to use their NRA as a tool-kit and aide-memoire at points of transition.
- Clarify how the NRA process is to be resourced.
- Support schools in integrating the NRA process with the curriculum.
- Recognise that when young people write positively about themselves they need special support because it involves a change in peer and school culture.
- Aim for the NRA to become a standard part of practice in assessment and recording in educational institutions.
- Aim for the NRA to become a standard part of practice in appraisal schemes in employment.
- Recognise that to use resources effectively, institutions need to integrate the NRA with other on-going work and new developments.

References

Dearing, R (1996) *The Dearing Report: Review of 16-19 Qualifications*, London, SCAA Enterprises Ltd.

Full Report

Further details of the study are in the final report – *The National Record of Achievement in Scotland: An evaluation* – which can be purchased from the Scottish Council for Research in Education, 15 St John Street, Edinburgh EH8 8JR. Tel: 0131 557 2944.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of The Scottish Office Education and Industry Department who funded the study.

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